

Mel Birnkrant *Presents:*

CARVING The Comics

The Amazing Art of **CHARLES PONSTINGL**

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INTRODUCTION

Could “Talent” be a tiny seed, sown by Fate, haphazardly? And could such a seed lie dormant for nearly 40 years, then suddenly burst forth spontaneously, and grow into a glorious tree? This is a question that I ask myself frequently, for every nook and cranny of the environment, in which I live is overflowing with the fruit of such a tree, a bountiful harvest that I am blessed to feast my eyes on every day, the Amazing Art of Charles Ponstingl.

The concept of “Talent” has always fascinated me as I was accused of having some, myself, as a kid. Of course, I knew otherwise. Right from the start, I realized that what appeared to be “talent” in other people’s eyes was only the fact that I had bundled all my energies together, and put them all into one container. Thus, when it came to Talent, and whether or not it existed, I was a skeptic, nearly a nonbeliever.

Nonetheless, like Houdini who spent his life (and death) trying to ascertain if true Magic, embodied by the Afterlife really existed, I kept my eyes open for any signs that real Talent existed too. I mean True Talent, not a mere knack or aptitude, fed and fostered in an art school, like mine, but true Raw Talent, pure and simple.

Enter, Charles Ponstingl!



Well, actually, at this point I didn’t know his name, nor did I learn it until years later. I would, in fact, have never come to know it if the antique toy dealer who “discovered” “CP” had his way. The fact that we eventually met was something of a miracle. I’m convinced it was predestined, guided by the hand of Fate.

Now, through the magic of the Internet, you are invited to undertake a journey of discovery to meet Charles Ponstingl, a genius, hiding in plain view, whose incredible wood carvings, up till now, have only been seen by a fortunate few, those rare individuals who, by chance or happenstance, have passed through the portals of what our friend Kenneth Anger, long ago, christened, “Mouse Heaven”.

Therefore, this website or “E-book”, as some might call it, is overdue. A “real” book, of the coffee table variety, or an Exposition would be more in order, but, clearly, that is not about to happen. Thus, this will have to do. Alas, it is true that neither book nor computer can fully do Charles’ carvings justice, for they exist in three dimensions, and the way they manipulate and play with space is a large part of their magic. Furthermore, the fact that they are all made of wood, has to be seen in person to be believed.

Nonetheless, this Internet format does offer certain advantages: First of all, the World can see Charles’ work, at last. Beyond that, the colors are true, and the lighting can be controlled to show his art to good advantage. All type and images have been confined to a narrow band readable on even the smallest computer screens. This conveys a false impression of the larger most impressive works, which average 12’ high by 30” wide, and appear severely minimized when reduced to fit this narrow size. In spite of the shortcoming, it is better to see these works small, than to see them, not at all.

Now, where should I begin? Maybe with Charles’ birth in Allentown PA, around 1935, as one of 13 children. His parents, Joseph and Anna could trace their roots to Austria. ... On second thought, attempting to recount Charles’ early history finds me in unknown territory. I would be better off beginning at the moment our paths crossed and our lives intermingled. That was over 30 years ago. From that moment on, we have been the best of friends. How we met is a curious story:

THE BEGINNING

Toy dealers and toy collectors are often one in the same. Many dealers begin as collectors, and sell to others in order to maintain their hobby. Then, over time, some collectors become fulltime dealers, but, nonetheless, the inspired quest to discover treasures remains unchanged. The most creative dealers are gifted with an “Eye”, able to see uniqueness and beauty in objects others would see as ordinary. Then, they have to take the chance of investing their money, in the hopes that some collector will verify their foresight by purchasing that object at a profit. The most gifted dealers know exactly how to price an item, based solely on its rarity or intrinsic aesthetic merit. These dealers love collectors who verify their vision, and visa versa. They often become the best of friends.

On the other hand, there are some dealers, who are just in it for the money; for them, the word “customer” is synonymous with “victim”. They price an item based on their cunning ability to intuit a customer’s level of obsession, and ask whatever outrageous price they sense their dependency will bear. And so it is, toy dealers run the gamut, from Princely to Predatory. As a collector, I have tiptoed through the two extremes, smitten with many dealers, bitten by a few. It is from this rarified group of unique individuals, toy collectors and toy dealers, that I have collected most of my best friends, and perhaps, an enemy or two.

And so the tale begins: Ron Van Anda, a friend and gentleman, is one of the princely dealers. Among the wide range that antique dealers span, he’s one that I always considered a Class Act. Ron has a fabulous “eye”, particularly for folk art, and, occasionally, Comic Characters. He has sold me many amazing things over the years; and he and his wife Sandy are among the the small list of trusted dealers. who were always welcome visitors here.

On the first day of the first Brimfield Flea Market of 1978, Ron told me he had something he thought I would like. And took me to his van to show me four shadow boxes with scenes carved out of wood. They were a little primitive, a little naive, but quite fabulous. Ron, as usual, was right; they were, indeed, something I would like. He explained that they were four of sixteen, the rest of which were various sizes, some smaller, some larger. He had put four in his van to show me and left the rest at home. If I was interested, he would deliver the other twelve to me.

It is amazing how even these, the first four carvings that Ron showed me displayed characteristics that proved to be prophetic; touches of unspoiled freshness that have never faded from Charles' art, in the many years that followed. This first, in which the Little Bad Wolf is handing his dad a can of beans, while Papa studies a book of pork recipes, is typical of Charles' propensity to portray a scene that often seems elusively arbitrary; characters caught in mid-action, rather than posing for the camera in an iconic fashion. Then, he freezes the moment in wood for all Eternity.

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And this is the story that Ron told me: An old time toy dealer, who I'll call "Tom", had acquired these carvings, of which there were twenty. It seemed that Tom was keeping four and sold the remaining sixteen. They were the work of a man who Tom's son had met at work. This guy was described as a "crazy old coot", a cantankerous old timer, who refused to take suggestions or requests, and just carved what he pleased. None of that mattered, anyway, as he had stopped at twenty carvings, and was never going to carve again!

Another toy dealer, Jimmy Maxwell, famous for unique finds and record breaking prices, both as a seller and a buyer, had gone into partnership with Ron, and together they purchased the sixteen carvings from Tom. Then, Ron bought out Jimmy's share, and offered all sixteen pieces to me for \$2,000! Huh? The price seemed unbelievable! All these high-priced dealers, passing them from one to another, and they ended up at \$125. each! That was ridiculous! Of course, I wanted them! I wondered what Tom gave the poor old man who did them? Well, part of the story Tom told Ron was that the guy who carved them put them on display in a bank, priced at \$20 each, and nobody bought any. Knowing Tom, I could speculate with certainty that he bought them from the carver for even less than that.

So, I carried the first four carvings to my vehicle and spent the next few nights, throughout the week of Brimfield, sleeping in my station wagon with the four carvings beside me, admiring them and wondering what the subject matter of the other twelve might be.

This second carving was my favorite. Admittedly, the pigs were a little crude, and the composition a little bottom heavy, but Oh my God, look at that fireplace! Pure insanity! The brave and brazen audacity of carving splashing water out of wood blows me away! And the slap-dashes of flame! Either the room is bathed in golden light, or the pigs have been playing with orange paint.



Charles' off the wall solutions to impossible challenges are always surprising. Blotches of orange paint on everything! And yet it works! Over time, he would find other ways to portray light. But for now, OW! The flames have licked the heel of that wild and crazy wolf foot, protruding from the pot.



Bugs and Elmer is pretty much straight forward. Charles finds this early carving most amusing, as Elmer has two right hands. That's the kind of mistake he would never make again.



Before photographing the many carvings that appear on this site, I had to carefully clean each one, and sweep away decades of dust. I thought it would be a tedious task, but, actually, I enjoyed it immensely. In the process, I rediscovered nuances that I had long ago forgotten, and discovered others that I had, incredibly, never noticed until now. Viewing the newly cleaned carvings through the camera's objective eye, enabled me to see each one of them anew, and fall in love with them, all over again.

Last of the four, is Bucky Bug. How I loved this offbeat comic strip when I was a kid! This carving exemplifies Charles' playful tendency to not supply a single straight-on perfect viewing angle. Here, two main Characters, "June" and "Bo", are only visible from above and to the side. And Bucky's head is turned away.





This is only the beginning of a story that spans nearly 40 years! You aint seen nothin' yet! As you travel from page to page, be prepared to be AMAZED!

A SPECIAL DELIVERY

A few weeks later, Ron Van Anda appeared at my house with the other twelve carvings! Among them, were some really large ones. And there was one rather small one. On the back, written in pencil, was the date: 3/14/73, and etched into the wood, as if seared by a hot branding iron, were the initials "CP". This was the earliest date of all the carvings in the group. They ranged from 1973 to 1978.

Of course, I didn't know who "CP" was, and would not learn his name for several years. But I will jump ahead here, for a moment, to say that, later on, Charles began to number his carvings. And he informed me that if he could go back and apply the correct numbers to his earliest efforts, this, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" would be "Carving Number 1". His latest work is numbered "227". What a journey it has been! Thirty-nine years, and 227 carvings, later, more than 150 of his best works, many of which are Masterpieces, reside with me.

He also told me how it all began: One day, when he was in the midst of middle age, he picked up a penknife and a block of wood for the first time just to see if he could carve something. One of his many brothers was adept at carving birds and animals. But wildlife was not Charles' thing, therefore, for inspiration he turned to Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Here is that first carving, shown actual size below. It is interesting to note that right from the beginning, Charles was interested in lighting. The attempt to show the torchlight glowing on the wall, the water, and Mickey's clothes by random patches of orange paint is somewhat naive, yet, curiously effective. And, Mickey Mouse was, indeed, a fitting beginning for the many works that were to follow, as almost all of them were based on Comic Characters.



To understand Charles' interest in Comic Characters, one need only look back to his childhood. All the Funny Folks, and the Great Artists who created them, speak to him of simpler times and better days, echoing an era when America was still fresh and brave. They carry him back to his earliest days, a time when good and evil were still easily discernible, and almost everyone, as well as the Comic Characters that Charles met in the "Funny Papers", were all on the same page.

Ron carried the carvings into my house, one at a time. Each one was contained in its own carefully constructed carrying case. As I lifted the lid of one box after another to feast my eyes on the treasures that hid inside, I thought, how strange this whole adventure seemed. These mysterious carvings; how did they come to be? The work of this reportedly unpleasant old man was clearly talking to me, and telling me a story that didn't quite add up. Could this curiously friendly and so lovingly crafted body of work really be the product of a difficult and cantankerous old man? And why was it "he would never carve again"?

Below, are some of those twelve carvings. As you can see, not all of CP's earliest efforts were great. But, if one follows the penciled dates, the growth that took place from 1973 to 1978 was amazing! I wondered what those that Tom kept for himself might be. If "The Headless Horseman", the final carving, chronologically, was any evidence, they must have been truly fantastic.



“Little Hiawatha” appears to be CP’s second carving, 5/24/73, and Pinocchio, done later that same year, was his third. I can’t say they are among my favorites. In fact, as I photographed the multitude of images you are about to see, I originally eliminated these. But writing this, I realized that they, too, belong here to show where CP began and just how far he came from there. Even these first attempts display signature traits that will reappear consistently throughout the years, the objects coming out of the frame, the nameplates, always with the original creator's name; these will remain. Each original artist’s name always appears predominately on the frame, while Charles signs his work with only the initials CP, hidden inconspicuously. He always considered his own work to be inferior to the original art that inspired it. In the case of the next two early carvings, I agree.

Every piece that Charles creates is intended as homage to an artist he considers greater than himself. They are love letters to artists he regards as deities, each of whom he places on a pedestal. The story of Our Lady’s Juggler often comes to mind when I think of Charles Ponstingl. The humble juggler has no gift, other than his skill at juggling, to offer the Christ child, and that honest offering becomes the one that makes the Baby Jesus smile. I sincerely believe that the great comic artists that Charles honors in his carvings, wherever they might be, are smiling as well.

Another precedent that was set in Hiawatha is the fact that, in the future, nearly every piece that Charles would do would be limited to four inches deep. How he would eventually learn to manipulate that shallow space to fit the whole world into it, is, in itself, a great adventure. One primitive attempt is seen below in Pinocchio. J. Worthington Foulfellow Fox and Gideon the Cat have been squashed flat! Charles will soon abandon that! In fact, every figure in every carving will become full round, and fully sculpted and painted, front and back!



This early carving, dated 1974, is plain and simple. Here are “Mutt and Jeff” as they appeared in their later years, the way I knew them as a kid. Jeff is discovered in the act of painting a flat car. He has a slight problem with his left arm. “Cicero’s Cat”, who is also flat, prowls on the backyard fence.



“Snuffy Smith” relaxes in his “Hootin Holler” cabin while his wife “Loweezy” and baby “Tater” look on. They are both hewn from one single piece of wood. Tater’s upraised pinky finger has not been added on. It is the results of careful carving. To render an entire double figure and leave that tiny fragile finger intact is an amazing feat. At least, I thought so at the time. Over the years, I grew accustomed to such virtuosity, as CP continued to raise the bar and break new barriers in the catagory of “Impossible to Carve”!



"Puppy Love" was a 1933 Mickey Mouse cartoon. So, how did it get transformed into this hideous late Mickey style? And Minnie with that awful bow! In my opinion this carving was a bow wow. It made me wonder where CP got his reference material, a 1940s comic, maybe? Years later, when I actually got to know CP, I never attempted to influence him visually. His natural talent was something that I was always careful not to spoil. Nor did I ever suggest specific subject matter. All the choices remained his to make. But, I must confess, I did subtly encourage him to tune his eye to "vintage" 1930s Mickey.



CP grew up in the era of Mickey's decline. It was a time when Donald Duck was king. Donald ruled the Magic Kingdom, frequently appearing on the silver screen, but, more importantly, in "Walt Disney's Comics and Stories", which was everybody's favorite comic. The adventures of Donald and his nephews and their irascible uncle \$crooge McDuck, as rendered by the inimitable Carl Barks, was all but required reading for every red blooded American boy.



It was Carl Bark's Donald and his nephews, Huey Dewey and Louie who defined what comic books were all about, especially for those too young for superheroes. Once addicted to Carl Bark's Donald, one often remained a lifelong fan. CP certainly did. And this excursion into the Andes was one of the highlights of the first sixteen carvings



Not only, did CP get “Lost in the Andes”, but, while there, he found Cubism! Square chickens! Really? I loved those Cubist chickens and the rather squarish Incan. This carving, like nearly all of the large horizontal shadow boxes to follow, measures approximately 30” x 12”.

Up to this point, I saw CP’s carvings as an interesting curiosity, and the fact that a cantankerous old man would choose to whittle comic characters, amusing. The shadow boxes were both naive and charming, and a little funky. But, never did I dream that they would open a doorway to a lifetime of friendship and adventure, and soar into the realms of Awesome. When I lifted the cover of the box marked Headless Horsemen, I’d saved it to the last because it was the biggest, everything changed! My God! This altered the whole equation! I hesitate to use the word Masterpiece too often, as there will be so many opportunities to say it in the pages that follow. But with so many Masterpieces to come, this, in retrospect, might be considered the first one.





The figure of Ichabod on his pony is exquisitely well done! The Headless Horsemen, the haunted graveyard, the twisted trees, all packed into a universe 4 inches deep! This was far better than the movie! If Tom could part with this amazing carving, how wonderful were those he chose to keep?



At my insistence, Ron told me the whole story again. I questioned him every which way in an attempt to glean any tidbit of information that might shed more light on the situation. But Ron had no more to offer me, other than the story that Tom had told him. On the other hand, he kept emphasizing the fact that Tom still had 4 carvings left, and suggested that I telephone him.

So I hung the first 16 carvings all together on a brick wall in the hall. And after a few days, I gathered up my courage and gave Tom a call.

I have heard tell that certain Polynesian peoples have a language consisting of only a few words, but each word has a multitude of meanings, depending on the subtle nuance of how it is intoned. Tom's vocabulary always reminded me of such a language. One word in particular, consisting of only 4 letters, served as noun, adjective and verb. It dominated his "colorful" conversation, appearing every several seconds. What that word is, I'll leave to your imagination. But, suffice it to say, if that over-used "expletive" were deleted from Tom's conversation and replaced with a "Bleep", the resulting ruckus would resemble the honking of a gaggle of geese.

I informed Tom that I had purchased the 16 carvings from Ron and understood that there were more. I asked if he intended to keep them, and let him know that I would be interested in purchasing them if they were ever for sale, now or in the future. Tom explained that he had, indeed, held back a few pieces. But, because they matched the dining room curtains, he intended to keep them. A couple more, "Goofy" and "BLEEPIN' Bambi" were in his sister's kid's bedroom, and they, too, were not for sale. He wouldn't say what those he was keeping were.

I inquired for more details of the story about the "Crazy Old Man who would never carve again". When Tom made it clear he wasn't going to tell me any more than he told Ron, I accepted that at face value, and ventured into deeper waters, telling him that I had been staring at the initials "CP" and somehow seemed to "sense" that the "C" might stand for "Charlie". Seeing I was now the appreciative owner of 16 of CP's carvings, and there would be no more forthcoming, I asked if would he be willing to tell me the artist's name?

The answer was, "BLEEP, NO!"

"Oh! Well, could you at least let "CP" know that one collector owns 16 of his carvings, and that he LOVES them?"

"Yeah sure! Why the BLEEP not?" he said. Of course, I knew he never would!

That was the end of the conversation! There was no place left to go.

DAYS OF TOM FOOLERY

Several months later, the phone rang. It was Tom. “Do you still want more of those BLEEPING carvings?” he inquired.

“Yes, of course”, I answered. “Did you get new dining room curtains?”

“BLEEP No! These aint the BLEEPING carvings that I own; I’m keepin’ those! These are BLEEPIN’ NEW ONES! He did MORE!” was the reply. And so, it began, a routine that went on for a few years. The crazy old coot story had evaporated. “CP” was obviously alive and well and carving up a storm.

Thus, on the opening day of Brimfield, three times a year, the minute I got there, I parked my car and headed for Tom’s van. There, he would open up the sliding door, and lying on its back on the floor would be another carving. Each time, the price got higher. He was sizing me up, like a carnivorous tiger, and ascertaining how far he could go. How much could he make me pay, without killing his prey?

I didn’t complain about the sky-rocketing prices, as the carvings were worth it in my eyes, but I also knew that in Tom’s eyes I was getting BLEEPED, and he was loving every minute of it. I wondered what he was giving CP for these new carvings? Twenty dollars each? Nonetheless, I paid the rising prices willingly, but I wished the money could have gone to CP, directly; whoever he might be.

Here are a few of the carvings Tom sold me:



CP’s rendition of “Pinocchio” is a lyrical lullaby of light! Here, he tries his hand at Chiaroscuro, the Renaissance technique of rendering light and shadow. The effect is highly painterly with dramatically dark shadows, artfully cast upon the walls, and splashes of blue-white light, applied intuitively, in a well-intentioned, although, somewhat naive attempt to achieve the dazzling effect that the Blue Fairy actually glows. And, miraculously, she does!!



Here are the “Katzenjammer Kids”, one of the few comic strip drawn by two different artists under two different names, and simultaneously appearing in two different newspaper chains. It was begun by Rudolph Dirks in 1897. In 1912, Dirks left the Hearst organization and another artist, Harold Knerr drew the strip for the next 37 years. Meanwhile, Dirks continued to draw his own version of the Katzenjammer Kids for Pullitzer, which he called “The Captain and the Kids”. It ended its run in 1979. The Katzenjammer Kids, on the other hand, continues to be syndicated by King Features to this day, It is the longest running comic strip in history. Many of the characters in Charles' carving, “Miss Twiddle”, “Lena” and “Rollo” were actually created by Kerr. Confusing, isn't it?



THE KATZENJAMMER KIDS
RUDOLPH DIRKS

The ghosts of Hendrick Hudson and his merry henchmen in this fabulous carving of Charles' own invention bring a flood of fond memories back to me. Young Rip Van Winkle, so elegantly envisioned with cup raised to lip, is about to sleep his youth away as the Gnomes bowl a game of nine-pins that makes the Catskill Mountains resonate with the sound of rolling thunder. One of the Wonders of my childhood was Vernor's Ginger Ale. It originated in Detroit, like me. Down by the Detroit River, there was a mysterious building, a kind of Palace of Ginger Ale. One could go there in the late evening and sip a Boston Cooler, which was a foaming mixture of Vernor's Ginger Ale and heavy cream. The great hall's soaring interior was covered with gigantic murals, depicting Gnomes, very much like these, making the barrels of Ginger Ale. It's all gone now, the murals, the building, the city?



Eventually, the one man market for CP's carvings got so "Hot" that Tom decided that he could live without those he was keeping, drapes or not! His sister still hung on to hers. One of those Tom sold me, was the Toonerville Trolley, which is something of an icon for train and toy collectors. I could understand why he had been keeping it, apart from his sensitive eye for interior design.





WHOOPS! The WHEELS of FATE ROTATE

And so, the routine continued; always the same thing. On the first day of the flea market, I would visit Tom's van early, and he would sock it to me. Then I would pick up the precious shadow box and head back across the fields of Brimfield to deposit it in my station wagon. Savoring every detail of it, on the way, I'd carefully turn it over to see, along with the familiar initials CP, what date and number was penciled on the back. I had all the numbers memorized.

Then, one day, a Miracle occurred. Tom had, most likely, stopped at CP's house on his way to Brimfield, picked up his latest offering and laid it on its back in his van. Later, that same day, found me carrying it to my vehicle. As usual, I turned it over, to check the date and number; and stopped dead in my track. My heart nearly stopped dead as well, on the brink of an attack! There, on the back, signed in pencil, was the name, CHARLES PONSTINGL!



My mind was racing! My heart was palpitating. I found myself in a moral quandary. Would it be ethical for me to contact "Charles Ponstingle", alias "CP", myself? I posed this question to my buddy and traveling companion, Noel Barrett who, even then, years before becoming a star on the Antiques Road Show, knew everything and everybody in the world of toy collecting. When I told him of my ethical dilemma and hesitation about calling, he nearly fell down laughing, and assured me, many times over, that in this case, it would be "OK", as Tom wouldn't hesitate to do the same to me.

So, several days later, I worked up the courage to get Charles' phone number from 411, and call the Eccentric Uncooperative Cantankerous Old Geezer who I had built up in my imagination to the frightening proportions of something between Rip Van Winkle and King Lear, or "The Old Man Of the Mountain" in a Betty Boop Cartoon.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief, upon discovering he wasn't there. Instead, the phone was answered by his 18 year old daughter Terry. My God, She was bright and friendly and sounded perfectly normal to me; and I immediately felt at ease. I chatted with her for an hour, during which time, I formed a picture of her father, totally different from the crazy old codger he had been described to be. The call ended with Terry assuring me that her Dad would love to talk to me.



And so, with far less trepidation, I called again, later the same day. Charles, himself, picked up the phone. What a revelation! He turned out to be a warm and friendly guy! A year or so older than me, we were of the same era, and the same mind. And if he was a cantankerous old eccentric, then so was I. He and I turned out to be so alike, in so many ways, it was uncanny. And he, like me, loved Comic Characters. And, thus, began a friendship that has continued to this day.

From that first Fateful phone call, I learned a lot about who Charles is as a person, but little about his history. And I know little more today. Why don't I just ask him? Well, that is because, at this moment, he doesn't know I am writing this or working on this website. Charles is a genuinely modest person. And, although, I believe the World should get to know him, I'm not sure he would agree.

What I do know is that, like me, Charles Ponstingl grew up during World War II, and Patriotism was infused in every fiber of his being. There was no avoiding it! The entire country was unified on the side of freedom. Victory gardens flourished in backyards, and War Bonds were sold, a few stamps at a time, in the schools, where, by the way, the pledge of allegiance was recited every day. A child's curious eye could not fail to notice small banners with a single star, proudly displayed in many windows. Some denoted that a son or daughter had gone off to join the battle. Others, of a different color, signified that they would not be coming home again. Evidence of WW II was everywhere: in the headlines, in the music, in the movies, on the radio, and even in the Funny Papers, for many a Comic Character, from Donald Duck to Popeye, and Bugs Bunny, had gone off to fight the War.

These early influences remain strong and vibrantly alive in Charles today, love of Country, and a love of all the early Comic Characters, who appeared in the movies, comic books, and funny papers of their day, and the honest to goodness all American moral values they portrayed.

In 2007, Charles paid homage to a patriotic image that he vividly remembered from his childhood. This spectacular carving of "The Victory March" captures the essence of the Wartime Era, into which Charles and I were born. Here, Donald Duck, himself, leads a battalion of Disney Characters as they march off to War. Donald carries a gentle reminder that "the pen is mightier than the sword!" Yes, that does look like a real pen in Donald's hand, but it too, like EVERYTHING you are about to see, is all Carved out of WOOD!



Attempting to recount Charles' youth and young adulthood finds me in unknown territory. I do know that, along the way, he married. And he and his loving wife Jean remain happily wed to this day. They have a daughter, Terry, and she has a son, Jeremy, and Jeremy has, in turn, a son named Seth. So, Charles is now a great grandfather, and young Seth is the apple of his eye.

I'm not quite sure what Charles did for a living. I never probed the subject, as it was clear he didn't enjoy it much. On the other hand, he had a fabulous work ethic, a trait that he has passed on to his grandson Jeremy. I believe his career was something to do with the "electrical" trade; first as an electrician, later in sales. At one time, he was required to work with a computer. Now retired, he wouldn't have one in the house.

I imagine that, until the age of 38, Charles' life remained fairly ordinary, while deep inside him, a tiny seed of gigantic talent was hibernating in his DNA. Then, one day, when he was 38, for no apparent reason, he picked up a penknife and a piece of wood, and that dormant seed of talent, deeply rooted in his soul and the soil of Allentown PA, poked its head up into the sunlight and began to grow.



THE VISIT

Our first phone conversation was as much a revelation to Charles as it was to me. He was surprised and pleased to learn that all the carvings that he had sold to Tom had ended up with me. All, except BLEEPIN' Bambi and Goofy, which he hastened to inform me were not that great, anyway. Well, Charles never did think much of his own work. He is an extraordinarily modest man. And he never fails to present his latest offering, without profuse apologies for what he sees as its many shortcomings.

I have tried, time and again, to convince him that his interpretations are in many ways superior to the original art that served as his inspiration, and convey the fact that the thing that makes his work so interesting is not how well he copied the source material that inspired it, but rather, the personal touches that he adds to it, all of his own unique creation.

Even now, after all these years, I still suspect he's not convinced. Let's face it, Charles is not about to be hired by Disney to accurately render their characters as ceramic figurines, dead-on replicas of what one sees on the silver screen. That is not what Charles' art is all about. That's why I have not included any reference material here. It would give the wrong impression, by implying that comparisons are in order. They are not! The minute Charles picks up a piece of wood and begins to carve an image, that interpretation is his own, from that point on. Each becomes part of his World of Wood.

Throughout the months that followed, Charles and I communicated frequently, by phone and by letter, as we got to know each other better. Among the things we spoke about, early on, was Tom. I never asked Charles what Tom was paying him for the carvings he was buying, and then reselling to me. And I still do not know that to this day. But I did make sure Charles knew what I was paying Tom, and insisted that I continue to give him the same or more. It wasn't the sum that mattered; it was the fact that the creator himself was now going to be compensated, to the best of my ability.

Nor did I try to convince Charles to walk away from Tom, for that might necessitate a lie; and Charles is, above all things, an honest man. If Charles still wanted to continue selling carvings to Tom at what Tom was paying, knowing that he was going to pass them on to me at a huge profit, later the same day, as absurd as that may seem, that was perfectly OK with me. With or without Tom's profanity, the price that I would pay would be the same. But, in one scenario, Charles would get the entire amount. In the other, Tom would reap the lion's share. Charles would get BLEEPED. And I would get the carvings, either way.

Charles contemplated the situation, and, although, he never told me exactly what he said to Tom, I believe that, in the end, he decided to assume the role that Tom had cast him in, that of "a crazy old man". And informed Tom, that "he was never going to carve again", which was exactly the same story that Tom, himself, made up. Tom really didn't give a BLEEP. He had many cast iron toys in the fire, and bigger fish than I to fry.

After six months or so, during which time Charles and I corresponded often, and he continued to carve away, a grand visit to Mouse Heaven was planned to take place on November 9th of 1980. Charles, and Jean, and Terry, and possibly Charles' brother John, who often accompanied them on visits, appeared here, early in the morning. Also, on hand for the occasion was our good friend Gerald Haber, who was then the movie director for Hartford TV. Gerald has a fabulous film collection. He brought with him his 16 mm sound projector and a priceless copy of Disney's Pinocchio in the original Technicolor, which Charles had informed me was his favorite Disney movie. This, at the time, was a rare treat, for even VHS was not yet commonplace, and Disney films could only be seen in theatres.

My wife Eunice made both lunch and dinner with much wine in between, and it was a Monumental day. It also set the precedent for what became an Annual Event. And thus, every year or so, for the next 30 years, Charles and his family visited here for friendship, revelry, and delivery.

At some point in the afternoon, came the highlight of the day, Charles and Jean and whoever they brought with them went out to the car, and a grand parade began, as they marched in with a year's output of carvings. Each one was a total surprise. And there was always one or two, among them, that totally blew my mind or brought tears to my eyes

This may sound crazy, but I always simply assumed that one element of Tom's fabricated story was, in effect, a standing rule, that CP was "a cantankerous old timer, who refused to take suggestions or requests, and just carved what he pleased". Thus, I never requested, or even suggested, what I would like Charles to do. I always left the choice of subject matter completely up to him. And his choices never failed to surprise and thrill me. He often came up with obscure characters that I never would have thought of in a thousand years. So he really was doing his own thing, and I was loving every minute, every carving.

On that note, Let the Parade begin!



Yikes! I guess I made it pretty clear that I liked old Mickey. So a month before the first visit, Charles finished this Steamboat Willie. He also picked up on the fact that I liked Felix the Cat. So, he had done the carving below, just before he did that. I think this art came out of a late comic book. The thought occurred to me that Charles needed a little nudge to get on the right track!



Thus, on that first visit, we had a long discussion about what he was using for reference material. It turned out that he really didn't have any. He was actually piecing scenes together from scraps, bits and pieces of Big Little Books and a few old comics. And he liked it that way. He explained to me how he went about creating "Peter and the Wolf". It represents the kind of challenge he likes best, one, in which there is no preexisting scene, and he has to create his own from scratch. In this case, he started by carving the tiny red bird "Sasha", and built the whole thing around that.

Although, I was determined not to Art Direct, or tell Charles what to do, I could also see that he needed to upgrade his inspiration. And so, I gathered together a bunch of books and things and sent them home with him. Among them, was the first Mickey Mouse book and both volumes of the MM Movie Stories, the first hard cover Felix book, a set of vintage Mickey puzzles, and assorted other things. Thereafter, throughout the years, I added to his library with books as Christmas gifts. What he chose to carve from all these things was entirely up to him. And, by God, with no further input from me, he chose well, very well, indeed!

By the next visit, Charles had upped his game. He brought with him this amazing carving of "Felix the Cat" in an airplane. It was derived from the fabulous endpapers in the book of that same name. This carving made me squeal with delight. It remains a favorite till this day.





Here is another all-time favorite. It was adapted from the best of the four Mickey Puzzles. I hung it in a place of honor right above my desk. And 30 years later, it remains in the same place. Notice how, on these carvings, the simple name plates are beginning to get fancy, and interesting things are happening to the frames.



Each visit, there would be some minor carvings along with the more spectacular pieces. Here's a fairly early one, "Heathcliff". For some reason this cartoon struck Charles' fancy. It is a rather charming carving, but Heathcliff always seemed to be a not quite Garfield lookalike to me.



“Colonel Potterby and the Duchess”! This was a complete surprise! I had forgotten this strange little strip existed. It was drawn by Chic Young, the creator of “Blondie”, and ran across the bottom of the page on Sunday. It always reminded me of “Henry”, or “The Little King”, as, like them, there was little or no dialog. As a carving, this is another favorite. The delicacy of it is delightful, the tiny butterfly perched atop the paintbrush, the tubes of oil paint in the box, her skinny arms, her pointed nose, the wooden net. It is really quite surreal. The picture and the frame are one in the same, coexisting on two different planes.



“Sad Sack” was created in 1942, at the height of the Second World War. This simple carving is so typical of Charles, to capture an incidental moment, brushing a shoe, and freeze it in wood for eternity.



“Zambeezi” is a little known character from the Katzenjammer Kids strip, when it was drawn by Harold Knerr. I love the puff of smoke! This is a pretty little carving. The colorful ribbon on the frame works well.



WHAT'S AN AIRBRUSH?

I marveled at what I saw in Charles, a natural talent, unspoiled by any so-called art training, totally self-taught, and working in a cultural vacuum, finding his own way. Let's face it! Allentown PA aint exactly gay Paree, or the Art center of the USA. As he knew no rules, Charles had no fear of breaking them. And, from time to time, he would do the strangest and most wonderful things, nuances that I, as an art school graduate, would recognize and appreciate, but would never dare to do myself, or even contemplate. Thus, I felt the weight of a great responsibility not to train him! Not to spoil him! Not to "educate" him! Not to break that magic spell that true talent had cast upon him. How ironic that seems, considering I played the role of Art Director for a living.

On their second visit here, the Ponstingls brought with them a newborn baby, Terry's son, their new grandson, Jeremy. Over the next 20 years, year by year, we watched Jeremy grow up to become a fine young man. On that second visit, Charles also brought with him this small curious carving of "Daffy Duck".



Looking at Daffy, I noticed in the background, a gentle hint of yellow, beginning at the horizon and fading smoothly into the blue sky above. I did a double take and asked, "Charles did you get an airbrush?"

"What's an air brush?" he replied.

"It's a kind of artist's spray gun" I explained.

"No. I figured it was hot in the desert, the heat rising off the baking sand. I spied an can of yellow spray paint in the basement, so I just gave it a little squirt".

"OH!" I replied, and didn't give it a second thought.

Several weeks later, Charles dropped me a line, in it he said , "I GOT AN AIRBRUSH!"

After a less than spectacular first attempt, in the form of "Barney Google" below, in which he sprayed everything in sight, pink and blue in the sky, and the trees, randomly sprayed with white, I found myself giving him some advice. "Don't use the airbrush everywhere", I said, "but, sparingly, for best effect". He soon got the hang of it, and moved into a whole new world of lighting effects. The paint splashes, representing light were gone forever, and subtle airbrushing took over.



In spite of the carnival prize spray job on the background, and that garish green in the general area of the foliage, this small figure of Barney and Spark Plug is adorable. Charles has a way of compressing figures, at times, sort of boiling them down to size, and distilling the very essence of them. That really amounts to a "style" of his own, and it makes them most appealing.

Did Charles master the airbrush? You bet! The proof of it can be seen below in one of his best carvings yet. "Trick or Treat" is one of Charles' more understated masterpieces. The use of the airbrush is just right to cast a spell of mystery and the night. And the figure of Witch Hazel is perfection. Donald, who bars the door, in fright, and his nephews in their costumes are exceedingly well done. This is one of those carvings that does not offer a perfect head-on viewing angle. Donald can only be seen from off to one side. Note, also, that the frames are becoming much more interesting.



While were in sort of a Halloween mood, here is a minor carving with a Jack-o-lantern theme. One of the guilty secrets of my youth was the embarrassing fact that I read Mary Jane and Sniffles. It was always the second story in "Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies Comics", right after Bugs Bunny. Mary Jane could shrink herself down to the size of Sniffles the mouse, but judging from their adventures, it always looked more like the other way around. Notice Charles' attempt to achieve depth by diminishing perspective. Again let me remind you that all these shadowboxes are just 4 inches deep.



OK, while we're on the spooky theme, we might as well go all the way with the first Silly Symphony, "The Skeleton Dance". These skeletons are deceptive in their seeming simplicity. Their skulls are hollowed out for greater reality! The film was made in black and white, and Charles retains that color scheme.





And now another masterpiece, "The Mad Doctor". Charles put this whole scene together from several different images in Mickey Mouse Movie Stories. He built a complete laboratory, and manipulates light artfully, the spotlight shining down on Mickey, the x-ray machine lighting Pluto, a red light glowing on the wall, and night time, shining through the window, all the result of an airbrush used judiciously, and talent! Keep in mind the fact that this cartoon was black and white.



Charles has an amazing sense of color. Each carving is a whole new situation, and each has its own color range. They never rely on pre-determined clichés. And, thus, his range of colors knows no limitation. Anything goes, and everything works. In my days at Colorforms, I had a small group of limited colors that I could easily manipulate and assure a pleasant final product. I used them over and over again. Charles relies on no such formula. Each new carving has a color spectrum of its own. Each is completely different from all the others and colorfully unique.





EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

One of the things that I liked most about Charles work was the fact that I could always expect the unexpected. There was frequently an unpredictable element of surprise. Charles always managed to surprise me by doing some crazy thing that I could never anticipate in my wildest imagination. He would often try something "off the wall", and make it work, some fancy frame, or unexpected nuance. That extra element he added made it his own, and never failed to win me over.

I can think of many examples of this phenomenon, but none more outrageous than the one below. This is one of the four Mickey Mouse Puzzles, the one I happened to like the least. The subject matter and the characters were fine, but the busy wall paper in the puzzle ate the entire scene alive, and always bugged me. I never made any reference to this to Charles. These puzzles were just stuff, among the piles of stuff I sent home with him on his first visit. It was several layers down in a box that was closed. So Charles chose to do this on his own.

Now, if I were to use the original puzzle as reference material, the first thing I would do is tone down the wall paper, if not remove it, altogether. Charles did just the opposite! He let the crazy wallpaper EXPLODE to become a most outrageous frame! And, suddenly, the whole thing was transformed into a dizzying trip on a visual rollercoaster! Each dot, by the way, is a raised disc cut out of wood and set in place.



Mickey's Fire Brigade! Now Charles was really "Smokin!" And so was this burning building, thanks to the new airbrush! Charles masters space intuitively. Both the fire engine and the burning building in the distance are actually on the same plane. It's quite uncanny, the way he creates the illusion that the building is not simply small, but far away! When one sees this piece in person, not through the camera's eye, it does not spoil the illusion. The eye sees "size"; the mind says "space". The tiny fragile figures battling the flames are a preview of things to come.



"Smokey Stover" is a subject made to order for Charles' homage. This wacky strip was hugely popular in its day. One of its most fascinating features was the other world it portrayed, a world of tiny people who lived in picture frames. Always in the background, one would see their interactions and shenanigans, going on in the framed pictures on the wall. The scenes were always changing, and the people in them would often jump right out of the frames. How similar these were to Charles' carvings. Could there be, buried in Charles' childhood memories, a connection? He captures the essence of Smokey Stover here, the crazy gadgets, the funny signs and notices, the car with just one axle, and even little Spooky, a cat who always had a bandage on his tail.



Charles' crazy sense of perspective is all intuitive, without any rules determined by reality. He can make a shadow box, just a few inches deep, appear to continue into infinity, and cram a whole Universe into a shallow space. Had he ever attended art school, this easygoing manipulation of perspective might have been "corrected" with calculated vanishing points and other rules and regulations, and thus, destroyed. These next two small carvings illustrate the virtuosity of Charles' conquest of space.

Little "Spooky" got a shadow box of his own; lucky kitty! It is just four inches deep, and looks it! Visually, this is the shallowest shadow box that I have seen Charles create, although, in reality, they are all the same.



And then comes "Little Orphan Annie". Her world is also four inches deep, but Charles has altered perception with his illogical perspective. The converging lines are out of whack. The vanishing point is this and that. The streetlamp in the foreground is enormous. That, in the back, is a quarter of its size. After all, it is a block away. The writing on the window is off slant... and yet, the whole thing works to give a feeling of great depth. And the bleakness of color scheme conveys the deep despair of the Great Depression. I display these two contrasting shadow boxes, side by side, on the same wall, and see them as a sort of pair that illustrate Charles' versatility in articulating space. They both arrived together, and together they have stayed.



Annie has a rather fancy frame. Charles did that sort of thing again with "Andy Gump". This casual scene captures Andy, out by his dusty garage, cranking up his iconic vehicle "Old 348". He acquired the car and house as well from their former owner, "Old Doc Yak" who was a talking goat. Sidney Smith patterned Andy after an actual man he knew who had no lower jaw. Old 348 became the ultimate cast iron Arcade toy, a favorite among toy collectors. Here, Charles captures the essence of the toy quite accurately, if accidentally. I wonder if he ever saw the toy?



Here's something that was unexpected! This sucker (no Bleep required) is Five Feet Long! A Popeye Panorama! It features virtually all the characters, major and minor, from the Sea Hag to Swee'Pea's Mother. The styling is that of Bud Sagendorf. Can you imagine my amazement when this came through the door? It took two men to carry it, as it weighs a ton. You may notice different lighting in the photo. That is because it is fastened to the bell tower wall, and I cannot move it, or remove it, by myself. Therefore, it was photographed in daylight.



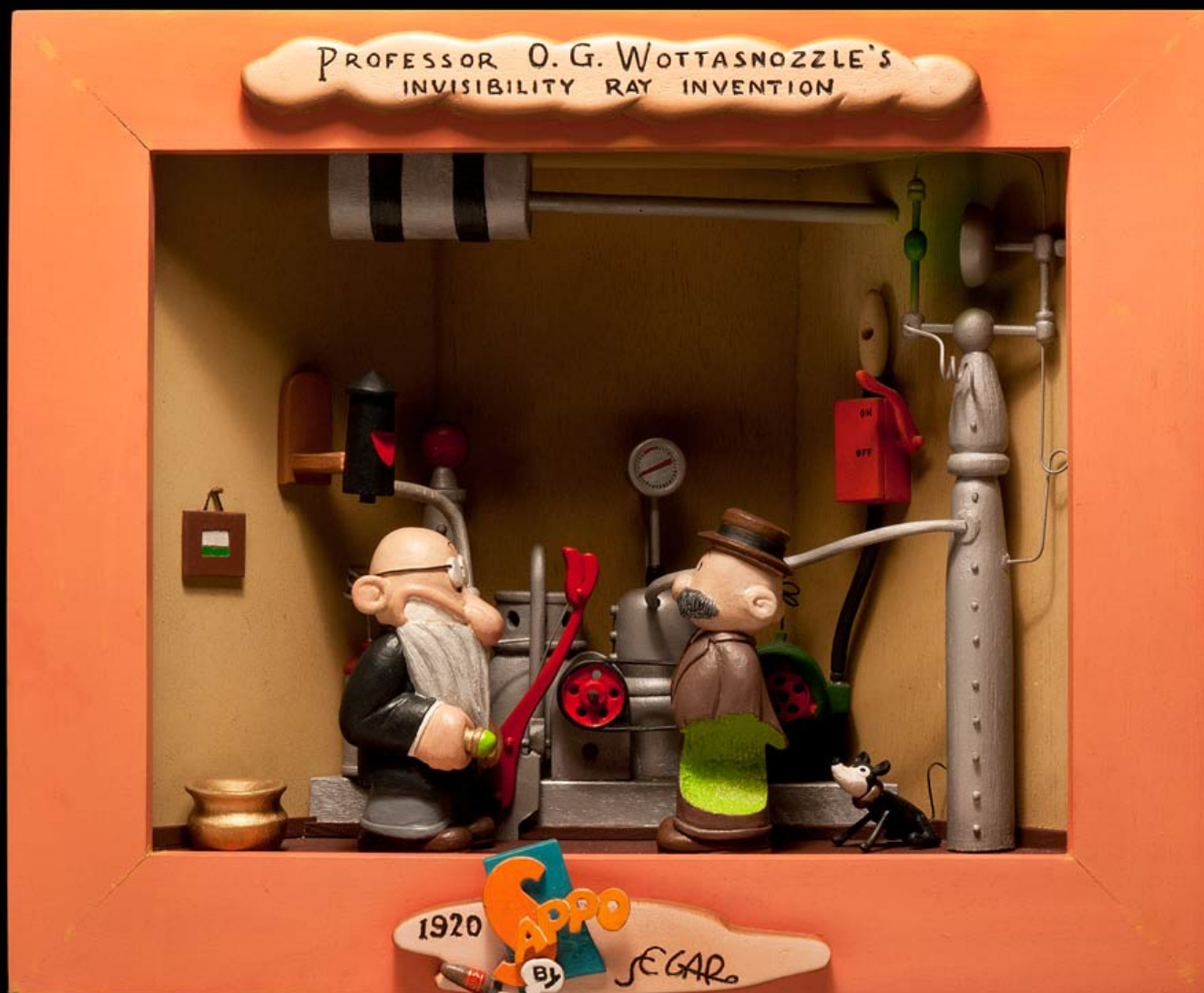




Charles' other Popeye carving is spectacular as well. It is high up on the wall above my desk, and my tall ladder climbing days are over. Having said that, I can't believe what I just did. I stood on a ladder, after all, and took the best shot I could. I think it came out rather good! This carving is relatively huge! It was based on the art on a Popeye lampshade that was actually drawn by Segar. Charles began the carving by turning a full sized ship's steering wheel on his lathe. That, in itself, is an impressive feat. The scene, a ship at sea with sails and rigging, is mounted in the middle. On deck, Popeye and Bluto are about to engage in a confrontation, while Olive Oyl is climbing up the rigging, and Wimpy floats behind in a hamburger stand that resembles a seagoing "privy". A stormy sea of wood carved water rages!



“Sappo” was what was called a “topper”, a secondary strip the ran on Sundays, below the main offering; in this case Popeye, by the same artist, Segar. The running story line usually focused on “Professor O. G. Wattasnozzle” and his wild inventions. Here he demonstrates his Invisibility Ray, rendering a portion of Sappo’s body invisible. It is actually a very cool illusion to see in three dimensions, with a hunk of Sappo, carved away.



Let's end this page with an excursion South of the Border to visit "The Three Caballeros" "Donald Duck", "Jose Carioca", and "Panchito Pistoles". Their flying serape is soaring right out of the frame. This is, in effect, a dramatic free-standing sculpture that cleverly appears to be floating in space. The color scheme is very South American.





CREATIVITY or ECCENTRICITY?

Some of the best aspects of Charles' carving are often difficult, if not impossible, to see. This can be both delightful and frustrating. In some respects, I believe Charles loves to tease. His figures live in their own Universe, unaware that we are out there, and none conveniently pose for the camera. At times, this situation is extreme, and Charles will even position lead characters, looking in the wrong direction.

"Alley Oop", is a prime example of this idiosyncrasy. The Carving, itself, is fabulous. "Dinny", Alley's dinosaur, is the only instance I have seen, in which Charles carved a figure that was not complete. It is implied that his massive body, continues behind the trees. Apart from him, with the sole exception of "Queen Umpateedle", you can't see anybody's face!



"King Guzzle", who, on close examination, proves to be beautifully done, is looking to one side. And Alley Oop, himself, is hidden by his upraised hand. But "Ooola" is the most difficult to understand; her face is completely hidden, buried in the wrong direction, and it is a very pretty face, indeed, as I discovered by means of a handheld dentist's mirror.



So, I have gone to great trouble here to enable Ooola to be seen. A tiny portion of her face is visible from an angle that is ridiculously extreme.



“And Her Name Was Maud” was one of the earliest comic strips. It was created by Fred Oppen in 1904. Oppen also authored “Happy Hooligan”. The strip featured “Si Slocum” and “Maud”, who was a mule, Hell bent on revenge. Someone, usually Si, always ended up getting kicked, literally and figuratively, “in the end”. This carving replicates Maud’s textured hide to great effect. Maud sits there defiantly, stubborn as a mule, while Si tries to pull her out of the shed. I love the dimensionality of this carving. Si stands out, in a way that is outstanding.



Mickey and Minnie head West on a covered wagon train, in "Pioneer Days". They are attacked by hostile Native Americans on the way. Many an early Mickey Mouse cartoon would be considered politically incorrect today. They all smoke the peace pipe in the end. That is allowed these days. Mickey, thinking outside the box, runs to Minnie's defense. The oxen have discovered that the trail West cuts right through the (orange) border and leads out of the frame.



Continuing the Western theme, “The Cactus Kid” was one of Mickey’s early movies. “Horace Horsecollar” as Mickey’s trusted steed ran on four legs in those days. “Peg-Leg Pete” has abducted Minnie! And, Mickey rushes to her aid. Careful Mickey, those cacti are prickly and each tiny spine is made of pine. The background sky is very painterly. The stars on the blue frame shine bright, deep in Texas’s heart, and mine.



“The Klondike Kid” was inspired by Chaplin’s film, “The Gold Rush”. Here, Mickey defrosts poor frostbitten little Minnie with a spoonful of hot soup as “Terrible Pierre”, alias Peg Leg Pete, bursts through the barroom door. Once more, Charles constructs a scene from scraps, then, although the film was in black and white, colors it, in shades that seem just right. The details are delightful here, the foaming mug of beer, the glowing lights, the red hot stove, the newly thrown knife, protruding from the door, and a spittoon on the barroom floor.





Right from the beginning, I could detect certain characteristics and tendencies in Charles' work that are not only charming, but, in spite his growing virtuosity and sophistication, happily, have never changed. I think my favorite is his sense of innocent naivety, his willingness to try anything. And so, he comes up with solutions to unsolvable problems that defy logic, and makes them work in his own way.

How can one best convey the impression that it's snowing? How about painting snowflakes all over everything, the sky, the figures, and, especially, the frame? This is a veritable blizzard of creativity. No artist schooled in tradition would be so brazen, bold, or brave. Charles' honest and straightforward depiction of a snowstorm has a whacky logic to it that transcends the ordinary. Apart from the wild unexpected flurries, the carving of the carriage and the characters in it is exquisite. The reindeer who pulls it, with his festive complex harness, jingling bells, antlers made of tree branches, including a few leaves, and puffs of breath, frozen in the frigid air, is both amusing and amazing!



NOT SO LITTLE NEMO

Of all the great comic geniuses Charles came to know through the material I introduced him to, it was Winsor McCay he came to love the most. One look, and Charles realized that McCay was the best there ever was. One might even say Charles was possessed with admiration for this amazing artist. And, if this enormous carving that might weigh a hundred pounds, and is worth every ounce of its weight in gold, is any indication, one might even say Charles was obsessed! “Little Nemo” became a subject that he would return to several times. But, this, his first awesome encounter, is beyond words to describe. If this be just a dream, and I’m in “Slumberland”, please do not say, “Wake up!”



How big is this monsterpiece? I'll go downstairs and measure. I can tell you this: It is more than 4" deep. OK, I'm back. It's dimensions are: 39" wide by 25" high, and 10" deep. The dragon is carved from a single block of wood, 23" high. There are no pieces added on, or plugged into him. The teeth, the tail, the finger nails, and those crazy things protruding from his head are all carved from one piece of wood! And then his massive body was meticulously adorned with tiny scales.



“Morpheus” the King of Slumberland raises his hand to greet his daughter, “The Princess”, and Little Nemo, as they arrive at the Royal Court, riding in the massive dragon’s mouth, which has been fitted with a couch. The King’s Courtier flies up to meet them,



while Nemo's friends, the clown-like "Flip", the mysterious "Dr. Pill", and the playful "Jungle Imp" wait in the wings



This was Charles' biggest carving, and, by far, his biggest challenge to date. He would never attempt this size again. Eventually, he would head in the opposite direction, and explore the limits of miniaturization.



Several years later, Charles visited the World of Winsor McCay again. In this fanciful vision, Little Nemo, the Princess, and Dr. Pill, are riding on a flying chariot, drawn by two white horses, elegantly prancing through the Slumberland sky. Beneath them, the clouds are turbulently transforming into wild phantasmagorical shapes, suggestive of strange living things. Flip and Impy follow on a bucking (no Bleep required) bronco, kicking, snorting, and exhaling fluffy puffs of cloud smoke. In the distance, 4" away, the lights of a majestic city glow. The full moon is shining. Stars twinkle in a sky of midnight blue





This enchanting carving hangs high up on the wall of my studio. This is how it looks, seen



AND IT'S ALL MADE OF WOOD

There is one huge overriding aspect of Charles work that is too easily taken for granted, and often overlooked. One gets caught up in the totality of the “carving”, the situation, the coloration, and the enchantment it conveys. Especially, when viewing it as citizens of this modern era, where three dimensional images made of plastic are plentiful and commonplace, we tend to forget that the Images Charles creates are carvings, and every minute detail in them is made of wood.

Until you have actually tried woodcarving, you can’t begin to conceive how difficult it is. I learned my lesson, trying to carve a giraffe at camp, when I was eleven. My injuries healed, but I refused to touch an Xacto knife again, until I had to use one, merely to cut small shapes out of paper, when I was 23.

Wood is either too hard or too soft. It splits and breaks if you go against the grain. And if you cut off a little too much, unlike the hunk I sliced out of my finger, it won’t grow back again. And Charles does not merely carve objects out of wood, the sort of stuff that we’ve all seen, like kuku clocks or bottle stoppers from Germany, chunky, durable, with chiseled faceted surfaces, indicative of the technique. He stretches the material way beyond its limits to do things with wood that have never been done before. There is nothing too delicate, too intricate, too challenging, too simple or complex for Charles to carve, and make it all look easy. Hairs, whiskers, and eyelashes, the tails on mice, the skinny legs on Mickey and Minnie, splashing water, burning fire, falling snow, and fluffy clouds, there is nothing on Earth that Charles can’t make out of wood, nothing that he can’t carve.

Sculptors, today, have a multitude of aids to make creating a three dimensional image easy. They can sculpt it out of something soft, then bake it, or cast it with silicone and epoxy. Even now, artists are already sculpting by computer. But the simple honest process of picking up a piece of wood and creating a one of a kind object, directly from start to finish, with only a hunk of wood, a blade, and talent, is an art form, and a process that became obsolete, three quarters of a century ago. And yet, this craft is alive and well in Charles Ponstingl today, as he continues to carve his way into new frontiers of the impossible.

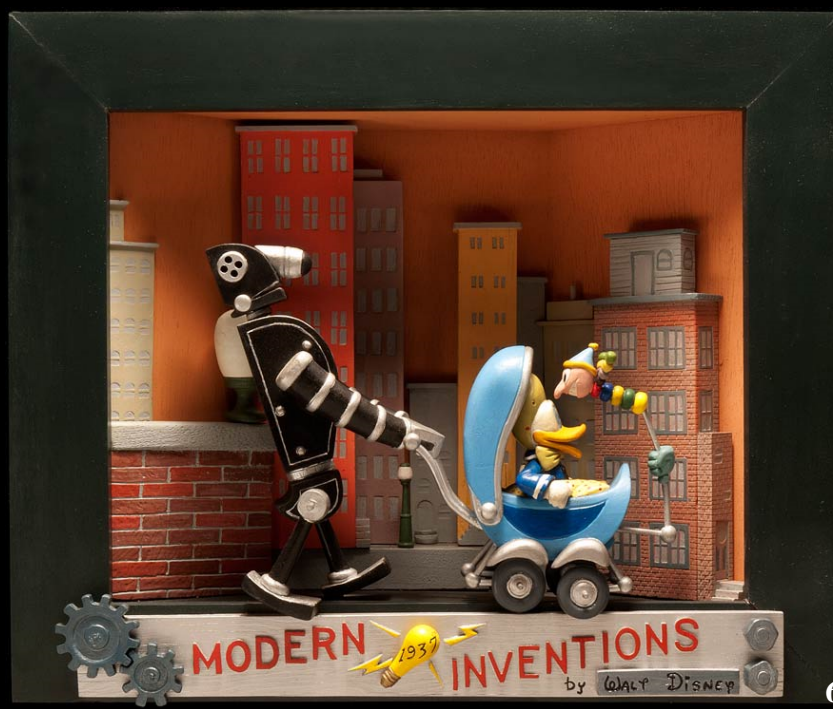


Having said all that, let's take a look at "Krazy Kat" George Harriman's unique comic masterpiece. Charles captures its simplicity and surreal quality. Wispy pink wooden clouds float through the dramatically black sky. The cactus plant has wooden spines. Krazy Kat all made of pine, pines for Ignatz Mouse, who is about to drop a wooden brick on his/her head from above. Hearts float in the air, proclaiming love. Offissa Pupp runs to the rescue, his feet both off the ground. He appears to be suspended in midair, inconspicuously attached, somewhere, invisible to the eye. Front and center, is a potted flower with a wooden stem, hardly thicker than a hair. And It's All Made of Wood!

Here, Charles carves another homage to Carl Barks, Donald and his nephews in the "Land of the Totem Poles". Donald is in trouble, a native has got him by the throat. A wisp of incense smoke rises from the bowl. It would be so easy to go out in the garden to get those realistic looking stones, but naturally, Charles carved and polished them out of wood. Donald's nephews play a steam calliope. But the stars of this carving are the totem poles, from really big ones, up close, to distant totem poles, carved in minute detail, much thinner than a pencil. And the crazy bold theme related frame is pure Charles Ponsting!



"Modern Inventions" features a very futuristic robot, circa 1938. It is pushing Donald in a streamlined baby buggy, in a city that must have appeared up to date back then. By today's standards it looks a bit passé. Charles is never content to merely paint in details, he insists on carving every letter, every brick and window, before he applies paint to it.





“Hagar the Horrible” is anything but horrible. This is an elegant carving, plain and simple. It captures the look and ambiance of the strip. The shields and the use of metallic paint makes for an unusual frame. Out behind the Viking ship, is a difficult to photograph octopus, swimming in the sea. I never really read this strip, but, looking it up, just now, makes me wish I did. All the main characters are here, from “Snert” the pup, to “Kvack”, “Helga’s” German duck.



P.A. Powers presents "Simple Simon" a "ComiColor" cartoon by Ub Iwerks, the man who created Mickey Mouse for Disney. The cartoon is in Cinecolor, which means that everything was mostly orange and turquoise blue. Charles even captured the feeling of the color in this excellently done carving. I love the great comic look of Simon.





To finish off the page, here is the “Whoopee Party”, which was a riotously great cartoon. Can you imagine cutting out that starburst with a jig saw, without losing a single wooden tooth? The shadow cast by the piano is painted on the slanting floor. I never saw Charles do anything quite like this before.

JOSEPH M. SCHENCK
presents
WALT DISNEY'S
MICKEY MOUSE



IN
The WHOOPEE PARTY
UNITED ARTISTS PICTURE

1932

SNOW WHITE

From 1990 to 1995, Charles, on and off, worked on a series of 10 pieces that represent the cast of characters from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". He did a few each year, until the set was complete, except for the Huntsman and the evil Queen. He even included the cottage of the Seven Dwarfs in one of those 4" scenes that defy depth perception. What made these shadowboxes interesting to me was not so much the Seven Dwarfs, themselves, but the amazing creativity, variety, and consistency of the frames, and the situations Charles invented to put them in. Each one is different and unique. Although, they were carved years apart, the whole set fits together with an overriding unity. Well, I guess that says it all. I will post the photos here, one after another, without further commentary.













Here at the bottom of the page, I have done the best I could to capture an image of a very large bas-relief, based on the beautiful poster art for the movie by Gustaf Tenggren. It hangs high up on a chimney, and my ladder climbing days are over, so I aimed the camera up into the darkness and tried to brighten and bring out the image, afterwards, with Photoshop. The lighting does not do it justice.



Walt Disney's
Snow White
and the Seven Dwarfs

DEVINE INSANITY

The cover art on the first hardcover Mickey Mouse book, "The Adventures of Mickey Mouse", is really very pleasant. It pictures Mickey, serenading Minnie by the light of a full moon. I can't believe I never noticed that the art on the back cover was directly related to the front. But Charles noticed it, and he opened the book out to reveal the entire scene, then transformed it into this most perfect carving. To see this in person is a treat. The characters are fantastically exaggerated. Horace's wooden arms are like long flowing lengths of rubber hose. Clarabelle plays a highly detailed tambourine. The pins and cymbals, and her arm and hand as well, are all carved in one piece. Each figure is perfectly placed. And thus, there is an interesting interplay of negative space, not always present in some of Charles' more crowded shadow boxes. That duck in the corner, by the way, is referred in the book as "Donald", three years before Donald Duck as we know him was officially created.



I'm pausing midway through the delightful process of cleaning a miraculous pair of carvings to save a thought that keeps imposing itself on me, before it fades away. The wealth of minute details and nuances that are hiding from detection in these carvings are convincing me that Charles must be either Crazy, or Inspired Divinely. The words that come to mind to describe his condition are "Devine Insanity"!

This perfectly matched pair of carvings that follow, embody the very essence of Charles at the pinnacle of his abilities. Although, he will soar even higher, later, this perfect pair exemplifies him at his best.

Charles titled this delicious duo, "The Barn Dance". They were inspired by the fabulous endpapers of "The Adventures of Mickey Mouse", the first Mickey book, the cover of which, above, he carved so beautifully the year before. Charles knew just how to surprise and please me. He really outdid himself this time. As incredible as it may seem, this perfect pair of carvings were seperated by a year. And when I first laid eyes on them, each one moved me to tears. How did he unify the two so perfectly, when the first, which shows the animals leaving the party came to my house the year before?



There is a lot more going on in these than meets the casual eye. It was Charles, who told me that Horace and Clarabelle are fully carved and painted inside their car, where they are permanently affixed and have not been seen, except by him. And can never be seen again.



I love the tiny puffs of dust that all the vehicles are kicking up, the motor carved in every detail, and the two tiny vehicles on the distant hillside that, although, only seen in silhouette, are fully carved and painted black.





The second carving is every bit as fabulous as the first. It represents the dance, itself. Sixteen individual figures, all in motion, interlocking and interacting; this is a masterpiece of carving.



While Minnie rapturously plays the fiddle, Mickey bangs away at the piano. Note how artfully he lifts his hand to turn the page of sheet music. The fragile stem of Minnie's flower and her tiny eyelashes too are carved of wood



To fully appreciate the wonder of this feat of craftsmanship, one must be very perceptive. Every minor detail represents a major effort. The leather harness, hanging above Mickey, appears to be merely an incidental accessory, except it isn't leather, and the straps were never separate pieces, nor were they ever flexible. The entire object, in all its casualness, rings and chain attachments too, was carved out of a single piece of wood.



Only today, did I discover that on the bottom of Horace's dancing feet, a pair of horseshoes are fully formed. One is permanently affixed to the floor of the barn, and the other can only be seen when the entire carving is turned upside down.



This feast of the barely detectible is a cornucopia of secret elements that only Charles has seen. It makes something more elusive clearly visible: the fact that he LOVED what he was doing, and all these tiny touches were there for the pure JOY of it!

THE BAND CONCERT

“The Band Concert” was the first Mickey Mouse cartoon in color. It was a landmark in the history of animation. In it, Mickey is the conductor of a small orchestra, made up of familiar Disney characters. The band is performing a concert in the park. Playing the “storm” from “The William Tell Overture” congers up a real tornado that sucks the band members into the heart of an enormous funnel cloud that spins them madly around as they continue to play.

How can I best describe this incredible carving, and my reaction to it? I can think of no better way than to copy and paste a letter, written a few days after it arrived. I sent this, along with photos, to my friend Rich Olson, who has been a huge fan and admirer of Charles work for a long time.

"OK are you ready for this? This one BLEW ME AWAY. Perhaps, because of the TORNADO, which is a solid piece of wood that weighs a ton. This is all Charles concept and realization. There is no piece of art to lift it from, he had to make it all up himself, and in the process, I believe he has transcended his previous work, and moved into another dimension. Like the leap from reality to Cubism. The whole thing seems to be in motion, and the logo he created, and every piece of debris, along with blowing music sheets and flying objects, are all caught up in a great swirling mass that works on real and abstract terms at the same time. No piece is arbitrary, and all work together in a great sweeping movement. The carvings continue on the back of the twister where no human eyes can, or will, ever see them. But Charles knows they are there, the true sign of a labor of love.

I find this nothing short of AWESOME. I still marvel that it exists, and wonder by what miracle it found its way to me, and allowed me to briefly feel that I can own it, momentarily.

I saw something wondrous in Charles work, 20 years ago, when it was considerably more modest. Yet it had a spirit and sense of adventure, that could only come, not from merely breaking rules, but only by truly not knowing any rules exist. Over the years, Charles has gotten better and better, but, all the while, he has never learned the rules. And the free spirit of invention he brings to these works is even stronger, now, than it ever was. While, at the same time, he has become a master carver and polished craftsman. He still remains a humble modest man, and I often feel that in spite of my constant accolades, he still does not fully realize or appreciate how Fabulous his work really is.

I have watched him grow from an inspired and innately talented folk artist and Comic Book lover to become, I believe, a TRUE GENIUS. I stand in AWE and ADMIRATION of HIM. He is also a True Friend."



Come, take a spin....













THE COMMISSION

As I've said, I never suggested what I would like Charles to carve, at least not consciously. Nonetheless, at times, I have wondered if he could read my mind. His choices always surprised and amazed me, and I saw this ability to choose well, as all part of his innate creativity.

Then on one fateful visit, the one on which he brought the Band Concert, we were standing up here in my studio, and he casually mentioned that his friend in Allentown asked him if he would carve a Mickey and Minnie for him and leave it unpainted. And then, he gave Charles the art to copy! So he did!

WHAT! I did a double take and said. "Charles, in all these years, I have never asked you for any specific carving. I always thought it was the rules that I would leave it up to you. That is not to say I didn't like it that way. I loved everything you chose to do. But this guy comes along, and out of the blue, asks you to carve a certain image, and you do? I think, after all these years, I have earned the right to ask you for something specific too. It would amount to a 'Commission'!"

Charles, surprised, replied, "You're right! I agree! The thought just never occurred to me!"

Wow! Now my mind was going crazy. I felt like a kid in a candy shop. What delicious morsel would I think up for him to do? After twenty some years of self-control, I went absolutely crazy and got ravenously greedy!

What artwork did I really adore? There is a curious book published in England, called the "Princess Elizabeth Gift Book". It was intended to raise money to sponsor the building of the York Hospital for Children, and consisted of a compilation of stories and illustrations contributed by the most popular children's authors and illustrators of 1935. Hiding behind its rather regal looking covers, which bore a painted portrait of the young Princess Elizabeth, there were two glorious full-color illustrations of Mickey Mouse and his friends.

The illustrations were done by an artist who seemed to be responsible for all the good Mickey art that originated in England at the time. I do not know his name. He had a style that was unique, uniquely English and uniquely Great! So I picked up that rare volume and handed it to Charles, saying "Guard this with your life! I want to commission you to do these two illustrations!" The book fell open to them automatically. The request was, I realized, rather ridiculous! Impossible to render in wood. I had picked them half in jest. I wouldn't have been surprised if he laughed, and handed the book back again. But Charles looked at it and said, "All right".

I will show you the first image below. It is called "Mickey and his Retinue, Arriving at the Party". It is absurdly complex. It pictures Mickey and his friends, walking down a yellow carpeted runway, while behind them a cheering crowd of thousands, well, actually 59, Charles tells me, cheer and toss bouquets of flowers. How would Charles handle the crowd? I wondered. Most likely, in bas relief, half flat and cut way down in size, I theorized.

I know I said I would not include reference material here, but this is an exception. You simply have to see the challenge I handed him that day.



Mickey Mouse and His Retinue Arriving at the Party.

And this is what he did:



From above, looking down, check out that crowd!



Fifty-eight figures, carved full round!



All of them squeezed into a space, 4" deep!





The second illustration was called "Mickey Takes a Photograph". It shows Mickey photographing his friends, who are posing in a Victorian sitting room. It is quite complicated too. The big view camera rests on a monkey's back!





And last of all, was an illustration of the Disney gang, atop The Monument to the Great Fire of London, with the entire city of London spread out behind. How would Charles represent that? Well he tried, one building at a time. Because this photo isn't wide, it can be show it here in a larger size.



Mickey and His Party Arrive
at the Top of the Monument
← WALT DISNEY →









PEACE ON EARTH

May there be peace on Earth. It's Christmas time! Believe it or not, after the Great Commission, Charles was still alive! And, a Year later, he arrived with this breathtaking surprise. The original artwork that inspired him, this time, was a classic pen and ink drawing by Hank Porter that was drawn in black and white. Charles not only did it justice by translating it exquisitely into wood. But, being a truly masterful colorist, he rendered it in muted atmospheric colors that capture the feeling of night, without resorting to using only shades of blue. Instead, he articulated carefully modulated full color, and at the same time, created the illusion of a bright moon and glowing lights.



It is Christmas Eve deep in the forest. The Disney folks are celebrating by singing Christmas Carols in the moonlight, while Dopey holds the lantern. This was 1938, one year after Snow White. The three pigs drag a fresh cut yule log home through the newly fallen snow, while in every tiny window of all the friendly forest creatures, cheerful yuletide candles glow. This carving is truly BEAUTIFUL!



This is as good a time and place as there will ever be to offer you a glimpse of an aspect of Charles' artistry that was not included in the numbering system. These don't count, in Charles' opinion, as part of the 227 pieces he has dated and calculated. The Christmas after the Ponstingl's first visit, here, what Charles referred to as "a Christmas card" appeared. A "card", indeed! This was no card! This charming wood carving was a "Gift" by anybody's measure, and a treasure; Mickey dressed as Santa, carved in bas-relief.



From that time forward, each year another "card" appeared, most often two, one for Eunice, one for me. This tradition has continued for over 30 years. Our humble Christmas presents to Charles and Jean paled by comparison. Each year I sent him books, and, by now, he well may have a better library of books on comic art than me. Of course, I always hoped that he would find something in them to inspire a great carving, so I chose the titles carefully! But this annual tradition, I fear, left me the winner. There was no way my humble offerings could compete with these. So, let me show you a few of my favorites. Oh, I might also mention that, each year, the cards got bigger, and quickly blossomed into 3-D. And so it came to be that long after we ceased to decorate a Christmas tree, Santa still found his way to my house on Christmas day, with a parcel sent from the North Pole, Allentown PA.

Here is the second year's card, Mickey ice skating. This was 1981.



As the years went by, the cards thickened swiftly, until flat cards looked sickly. One of Charles favorite Christmas stories is the depression era fantasy, "Mickey's Good Deed", in which Mickey plays his base fiddle in the snow to raise a few pennies, so he and Pluto can buy something to eat on Christmas Eve.



Mickey sells his best friend Pluto to a wealthy man, so he can be able to play Santa to some underprivileged kittens who, otherwise, would have had no Christmas. In the ornament below, we see Santa Mickey, filling up their Christmas stockings.



In the end, Mickey gets his pal Pluto back again, and together they enjoy a Christmas dinner and a heartwarming bonfire.



Writing this isn't easy, I find my mind wandering among so many memories. But moving right along, let's jump ahead to one of the all-time best. Charles visits our mutual favorite, Winsor McCay again, in this work of pure imagination, something only Charles could envision. It never really happened, even in Slumberland. Here is Little Nemo's buddy, Flip, playing Santa, with a fully trimmed Christmas tree tucked under his arm, emerging from inside the moon.



That was 1996. Two years later, Charles would outdo Santa Claus again, with a Christmas gift so spectacular that it took my breath away. This was way better than a Lionel train! What a Wonderful Christmas Day! Little Nemo, here, is really little! This was one of Charles' first purposeful attempts to explore a smaller size. Nemo and his friends are miniaturized, standing on a fantastic bed with star studded canopy and hanging tassels carved of wood, looking (in the wrong direction) with rapt attention, as Santa Claus, in a limousine packed full with toys, drives through the bedroom on Christmas Eve.



Charles is never at a loss for new ideas and new themes. For seven years, the annual Christmas carvings took the form of houses, forming a fantastic Christmas village, each one representing a different country. These are all spectacular. This one is from France, judging from the word, "NOEL" over the door.





The house below, represents Bavaria. Mickey lounges in his Tyrolean hat and lederhosen with a giant mug beside him, munching on a German sausage. His fur trimmed Christmas stocking, hard to see in the dim lighting, hangs from the rafters behind him.



I have no idea where this house might be located geographically, the North Pole, maybe. Four reindeer hold the roof aloft. This is my favorite house. Inside, is a charming Christmas scene, in which Santa Claus in person delivers a Christmas present to Mickey and Minnie Mouse. The label on the package is addressed to "Mel and Eunice". Would you believe the doors are actually spring loaded to automatically swing open when the wooden latch is released?



The Christmas gifts Charles carved for Eunice were a horse (or house) of a different color. Some are lyrical and beautiful, including a whole series of portraits of movie stars. There are simply too many of them to show here. They deserve a website of their own, but I will share with you, two carvings that I am especially fond of to a degree that has induced me to spirit them away. The first is this charming fantasy of a Christmas fairy that offers a glimpse of the kind of graceful carvings Charles might do if his tastes were more traditional.



The second is ... well suffice it to say that if up till now, Charles' abilities have succeeded in Amazing you, be prepared to be Amazed again by this exquisite carving from Fantasia. Keep in mind that he began this whole adventure with a modest scene of Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice from the same movie. Now, a mere twenty years later, by Christmas 1993, his skills have progressed to this degree. This is a freestanding figure of the Goddess Dianna, about to shoot the magic arrow that will explode into a million stars to fill the sky above the mythological countryside of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. The dramatic lighting effects, the way she is illuminated, which I took care not to diminish, Charles actually painted in. It's that airbrush again!



Walt Kelly's "Pogo" was a comic strip that I adored as a kid. It often appeared in the form of "books" as well, and I had them all. Pogo's inherent good nature and insightful philosophy seemed so deliciously grown up to me. A colorful cardboard mobile of him and his buddies from the Okefenokee Swamp hung in my bedroom throughout my childhood. And Kelly's art was so delightfully drawn. All those qualities, those memories, are echoed in this freestanding monument Charles gave me in 1993. It is so elegant in its seeming simplicity, compared to the complex emotions it conjures up in me. Pogo and his small insect friend, beautifully carved, herald in the Holiday. Stars shine deep inside. The greeting in raised letters reads, "LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY"!



Another strip that I loved as a kid was Otto Soglow's "The Little King". In this colorful Christmas carving, the King's servant helps him trim the Christmas tree. This fleeting moment is captured for eternity in a medium that Charles refers to as "kindling."



Charles' ongoing obsession with creating snow continues, and moves into another dimension of illusion, in this 2006 Christmas carving. Here every single snowflake is carved and attached individually. The effect is magic and uncanny. Although each flake is touching something, the eye perceives them as floating in midair. After all these years, Charles' ability to come up with new solutions to old problems is still there.



This 2008 Christmas gift is one of my favorites, a peek into the tiny secret world of Palmer Cox's "Brownies". High in a small bleak bell tower, the Brownies ring the Christmas bell. There is a bat in the belfry. One tiny figure pulls for all he's worth; another climbs the wooden rope. The candle glows from one puff of the airbrush. Charles has mastered the art of carving, from massive dragons to tiny Brownies. These figures are so delicate that it is impossible to touch them without a breakage, and yet, Charles not only touches them, but carves them. It's all here! Confident in his artistry, he has no need to overdo or overstate. The characters that he carves go about their daily lives, unaware that they are only made of wood. For Charles breathes a piece of his own life and life's energy into every one of them. They are born of love, his love of carving.



There are two final Christmas gifts that I must share with you. They will be coming at the end, which is near. But, there remains more wonders to be seen, before we get there.

THIS AND THAT

Once Charles had recovered from the challenge of "The Commission", I presented him with another one. I was a little ashamed of myself for doing it, because it could have turned out to be as crazy complex as the last one. But, Charles mastered it in an unexpected way. I wondered, over the course of a year, how large it would be, how many men might be required to carry it in, where I would find the space to put it. Charles solved all these considerations, wisely, by under sizing.



This Miniature Masterpiece now hangs beside me, tucked into a place of honor among my all-time favorites. A carving of the Yellow Kid was long overdue. It was with him that the whole concept of Comic Characters began. So, I referred Charles to a number of pages in one of the books we each owned in common, and invited him to take his pick. He chose perfectly, and surprised me with a decision based, most likely, on the fact that he must have known that, when I was a kid, I lived a year in Paris France, where Eunice and I met.

Yes, that is the City of Light, as it appeared at the Turn of the Century, stretching out, before you, 4" deep. Can you detect "La Tour Eiffel"? The wind is blowing, wooden feathers are flowing, the great balloon with its tiny passengers, each under 1", is ascending out of sight. The Yellow Kid, who is no closer to the viewer, but only looks that way, is suspended in midair by hidden means.



Here is a "Pogo" panorama that is delightful. The sun is setting over the "Okefenokee Swamp". "Albert the Alligator" steps out of his doorway in a tree. "Pogo Possum" and "Churchy" are in a boat that protrudes far beyond the frame, while "Miz Beaver" and "Molester Mole" look on. "Deacon Mushrat" chats with "Roogy Batoon", a pelican who is peddling snake bite remedy, which is of great interest to "Snavelly" an oft inebriated snake, who is prone to biting himself, then, binging on the remedy. Many of the characters that Walt Kelly created, with help from Charles, have carved their names into the nearby trees.



The picture frame becomes a window, as "Jiminy Cricket" perches on the roughhewn windowsill to drink in the awesome beauty of Pinocchio's village as it sleeps in brilliant moonlight. This sweeping panorama was the opening scene of Walt Disney's classic movie in 1940. And the audience was stunned and amazed by the wonders of the Multiplane Camera. The depth and complexity of this image is both soothing and insane. Charles has stretched the perception of perspective and the art of woodcarving to a new dimension, while reducing the distance from a tiny Earthbound cricket to the moon to a mere four inches.





This Mickey Mouse Picnic was one of the four jigsaw puzzles that I gave Charles for inspiration, 30 years ago. He finally got around to carving it. It was well worth waiting for. Charles invented and introduced the ants. I love when he does stuff like that. Every article of food is present, and it all looks delicious.



I enjoy the joyous abandon with which Minnie swings, and the gentle pressure of her hand on one of the wooden ropes. The deeper one gets into Charles' carvings, the more one discovers charming subtitles.



The tree branch that holds the swing aloft grows right out through the frame and back again. The tiny ant who sits on it with a napkin tied around his neck and a teacup in his hand, is having a picnic too.



This carving was inspired by the beautiful endpapers of "Felix the Cat, Book Two". Here Felix walks out of the clouds and down the rainbow into the Land of Mother Goose. All the characters are there, from Humpty Dumpty to the Old Woman who Lived in a Shoe. There's Little Bo Peep (no sheep) and Little Boy Blue. Little red riding Hood is there too. Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, Old Mother Hubbard, and a most impressive giant round out the crowd.



“It All Started With a Mouse”, and so it did, a mouse, a penknife and a piece of wood. And here Charles is, thirty-four years later, tracing Mickey’s history, from his caveman days, through all his famous movie roles, to the end of this long panel, where Mickey sheds his clothes, and appears without his signature red pants, yellow gloves and shoes, prepared to meet What, or Who? Only Charles Ponstingl knows! Charles really got carried away with this, and was swept up in the newly discovered pleasure of seeing how small he could go. These minute figures are so fragile one has to hold their breath when they get near.



I confess that I have broken many of these carvings, over the years. Thank God for Crazy Glue! One only has to touch them, and the thinner pieces break; the thicker ones do too. I did a lot of damage just cleaning them, and taking these photos. This makes me appreciate Charles' skills all the more, for, incredibly, he not only carves this delicate wood, without breaking or splitting it, but he has never presented me with a carving that had, in any way, been glued or repaired. He carves them, paints them, and assembles them with pegs and screws, and never breaks a thing!

From the minute to the majestic! Charles took that leap without a hint. He just up and surprised me. Mickey's Nightmare was just a pretty good Cartoon. In it, Mickey dreams he marries Minnie, and they have a lot of babies, who proceed to drive him crazy, and it turns into a Nightmare. But the Poster for this movie is, by far, the very best one ever. I'll never forget, when, 40 years ago, I saw Ward Kimball standing beside one on a TV show, and I went BLEEPIN CRAZY! Oh that reminds me; there is something mildly amusing I intend to tell you about Tom. I'll add it on below. Meanwhile, it was love, No, better say, obsession, at first sight. Eventually, I got the poster, a giant image of Mickey, looking Fantastic, with a small army of baby mice, climbing all over his body. It has hung in the hallway for years. And now Charles had rendered it in wood!



Here is a nuance that you might not notice: One small mouse with a pea shooter is balanced on Mickey's toes. He has just fired a pea at Mickey that is hitting him on the nose.





Before I forget: At the last Atlantic City Antique Show I attended, some ten years ago, Tom noticed me, passing his booth, and called out to me, "Hey Birnkrant, do you still want those BLEEPING carvings? My sister is ready to unload them now!"

I thought as fast as lightening, Bambi and Goofy? I had long ago decided I could easily live without them. They were not my favorite characters to begin with, and considering the masterpieces Charles had filled my house with over the years, I certainly didn't need to ransom these. Meanwhile, I could see the dollar signs flashing in Tom's eyes. My first impulse was to say, "BLEEP NO!" Instead, I replied, "No thanks, Tom. I'm not into those, these days. Your sister should have sold them to me when I would have paid anything. I'm afraid she waited too long, and missed the window of opportunity with me." I'm told that he still has them, to this day.

And one more morsel: My good friend Carl Lobel became quite friendly with Tom's son, who had become an antique toy dealer too, proving the theory that an acorn does not fall far from the tree. Carl and all my other friends have kept my collection of Charles carvings a secret all these years. Nonetheless, I sometimes wondered if anyone had spilled the beans, and Tom ever found out. Carl related this anecdote to me, indicating that, as of five years ago, Tom still didn't know.

Carl and Tom's son were conversing, while driving across in PA together, at that time, and the subject of my collection came up. Tom's son mentioned that his dad had sold me some carvings years before. Carl bit his tongue and asked mischievously, "What ever happened to the carver?"

Tom's son replied, "Oh, that old BLEEPER died, years ago". I passed this information on to Charles with my condolences. He was amused.

THE ULTIMATE

How can one decide which of Charles' carvings is his Masterpiece? Every time something new and wonderful appears, one thinks "This is IT!" But, in the eyes of everyone who has seen the carving below, all the others that came before it take a back seat! They all agree, "Little Sammy Sneeze" IS the ULTIMATE!

I must confess, this was another "commissioned" piece, perhaps destined to be the last. Something resembling retirement was creeping up on me. As far as collecting was concerned, I was running out of space, energy, and money, simultaneously. Therefore, I stopped purchasing antique toys, and allowed myself only one luxury, a carving by Charles, occasionally. It was clear that he deserved priority. The time had come for a Commission, and I was determined that, as I didn't know if it would be the last one, it had better be a good one. So, I attempted to choose wisely.

I suppose every collector has some magic moment of supreme good fortune, when they find something amazing, and on top of that, it is a bargain. Over the years, Fate has been good to me, and I have had many such occasions. But one that took place, 40 years ago, at the local Stormville Flea Market, was destined to play a role in the creation of Charles Ultimate carving.

Compared to Brimfield, Stormville was mostly junk. I even set up there, myself, a couple of times. That's how bad it was! On one of those occasions, I was digging through a box of old magazines. As I got closer to the bottom of the box, I came close to giving up. If the Market hadn't been so bad, I would have moved on. But I continued to the very bottom of the bottom, and there it was, a glorious and unimaginably rare 1904 volume of Winsor McCay's "Little Sammy Sneeze"! The price was fifty cents! I kid you not! I would have been equally as pleased if it had been \$500. Well maybe not! But I would have bought it, anyway.

The cover is delicious, drawn by McCay, himself, and even superior to the fabulous art inside. I displayed it as the background to a showcase full of Little Nemo figures. Over the years, the figures multiplied in number, until they virtually covered up the cover. Getting it out to make a copy for Charles was a major project. If not for that, I might have done it sooner.



“Little Sammy Sneeze” preceded “Little Nemo” by a year. In each episode, the story line is always the same scenario. When Little Sammy sneezes, the power of the blast blows everything away. On the cover of the book, Sammy has been watching a Circus Parade, and the SNEEZE is taking place! It demolishes an entire city block, the marchers, clowns, and animals, everything! Even the buildings are tumbling. These are not intended to be small toys, but the real thing.

So, that’s the story, and, this is what Charles created!



When I imagined how Charles might execute this subject matter, I was slightly apprehensive. It would be very easy for such a chaotic scene to simply look like the carving had been broken. But that is not the case. Charles did this with such sensitivity that, even though, the scene is one of total upheaval, every object in it seems comfortable in its place. And he has managed to create the illusion that the objects are in motion, flying through space.



One thing he did that totally surprised and thrilled me was the lettering. I had visualized flat cut out letters, possibly suspended on rods from behind. But Charles did two amazing things: First, the letters are truly floating. One can look at them closely, and it is almost impossible to figure out what is holding them in place. They are invisibly connected at a few subtle contact points, and all cleverly conjoined, not glued or pegged together, but carved as all one piece. One can peek behind them and study them carefully, and they still seem to defy gravity.

Secondly, I love the way he made the letters in the word "Sneeze" bend and twist and undulate. Nothing like that is suggested on the cover. He couldn't just cut them out flat, half an inch thick, on a jig saw, and then bend them, although, they look like that is what he did. But, like everything in Charles' carvings, they were carved that way out of solid wood. When I remarked about them, he said that it seemed perfectly obvious to him, as they would be disrupted by the impact of the sneeze.



That repulsive gob of flying phlegm was Charles' invention. It incorporates the sound that Sammy always made when he sneezed, "CHEE OW!" Charles also managed to make it appear to be suspended in midair. Is it attractive? No it's not! (hidden pun) But the truth is, I LOVE it! It carries me back, full circle, to a time, 30 years before at Brimfield, when I was lying on a mattress, in the back of my tiny station wagon, admiring a carving of the Three Little Pigs, and marveling at the naive audacity of a brazen unknown artist who dared to carve splashing water out of wood!





AN ANNIVERSARY

In June of 2010, Charles suggested a visit to Mouse Heaven. Absolutely! It was agreed that, this time, there would be no carvings. My bank account was on vacation, badly in need of rest and resuscitation. It would be just a get together to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the year we met, the year of their first visit here, the year our great friendship began, or so Charles said. As the date grew closer, he couldn't resist hinting that he did have a small gift he wanted to give me to commemorate the Anniversary. He implied that it was extremely apt and would be meaningful to me. My God, I lay awake at night, wondering what it might be.

I speculated on a thousand things, but never came remotely close to guessing correctly. And Charles was right, the beautiful carving that he gave me that day was indeed meaningful, so much so that it made me cry. It was, as always, a great day. I look forward to seeing Seth. He is a bright funny kid, curious and appreciative of everything. It's easy to see why Charles and Jean adore him. So do I. He was 8 that summer and more fun than ever. The year before, he'd given me a carving that he made, and he was pleased to see that it was still on display. Charles and I reminisced about a lot of things. Eventually, that exquisite moment came when Charles went out to the car and returned, carrying a carving. Seth, who had helped him make it, displayed it proudly.



Oh, My God! What a heartfelt gift, a gift so potent that words fail me to explain the reasons. In 1984 I had just transitioned from working with Colorforms. My adventures as a toy inventor with the sons of the owner of Colorforms as my partners were beginning. Our first project was called "The Weenies", and it looked like it was going to succeed. Coleco bought it, and planned for it to be the follow up to the Cabbage Patch Kids.



When the process of creating the Weenies was only half finished, I sent Charles a set of all 12 drawings that showed the characters. This was so early that they weren't colored yet. To make this tale as short as possible, suffice it to say, the Weenies got kicked out of bed. Coleco chose to do a toy called Sectors, instead. The disappointment was devastating and at the time, heartbreaking. Our hopes had been so high; our spirits fell so low.

Of course, eventually, we forgot about the Weenies, and I certainly never remembered that I had sent Charles those early drawings. When I mailed the drawings to him, I wrote on one of the sheets, the optimistic thought that maybe one day he would be doing a carving based on Weenies if they managed to succeed. Charles never forgot that, the actual note was pasted to the back of the carving. And here they were! Charles had made them happen! They did not succeed, but he did the carving, anyway, and he did it beautifully! He knew from the copy below the drawings that they lived in a town called Bunville, and, by God, with no more of a hint than that, he Created it! And the colors, he had no idea what they were like, but, nonetheless, he got them right. And so, the Weenies "happened", after all, thanks to my dear friend Charles Ponsting!! What a generous heartfelt gift, his friendship and the carving, both.



Meanwhile, for a long time before the visit, I had been thinking about asking Charles to do one more commission. There was a piece of art that I adored. It was the only known copy of a 1928 King Features Calendar with an amazing drawing by Louis Biedernamm. It was always a favorite possession, and hung in the most important position in the house, in the hall downstairs above a showcase with a Mickey Mouse Waddle Book inside. Over the 30 years that it had been hanging there, I saw it slowly fade. Yet, I had to leave it there, where I could see it every day. After all, was I not slowly fading too? So, I let it stay, there in its place of honor.

Before the Ponstingl's visit, I copied it with the computer and pieced an image of it together, actual size, ahead of time, and sent it home with Charles that lovely special day! He was happy to accept the challenge, as he loved the art as much as I did, and he loved a challenging commission.



The date was June 22, 2010. Twelve days later, returning from a Fourth of July Fireworks display, Charles and Jean were in an automobile accident. Charles' vehicle was stopped at a red light, standing still, when his friend who was driving the car behind them, somehow, didn't see Charles' car or the red light, and continued to drive through the intersection as if they were not there. In other words, he rear-ended them at full speed with no foot on the brake.

This is difficult to write. Jean was injured, but her injuries were of the kind that would heal, over time. On the other hand, Charles nearly died. His brain was bashed around inside his head... It is a MIRACLE that he survived. He was in a coma and remained on life support for a long time, a long time. Every day was touch and go. Jean never lost hope, well almost never, but there were times Charles' doctors almost did, times when the prognosis looked grim. Bottom line, today, Charles is very much alive. The angels were on his side. Can you believe, I'm writing this on Christmas Eve? It's nearly midnight. Time to say, Good Night.

TRIUMPH AND TRANSFIGURATION

Charles, Jean, Seth and John visited here earlier this year. It was, essentially, a social visit, a pleasant get together for friendship's sake. John and I coaxed Charles to let us take his picture. Always humble, he put up a battle, but, eventually, he reluctantly stood before the wall of early carvings, looking unenthusiastic, but GOOD! At one point, he struck a pose, a parody of what he thought we wanted! It was intended as a joke. That is the photograph I chose.



I remember Charles' first visit, here, thirty some years ago. We stood together in the hall before that very wall. There were only sixteen carvings on it then. I asked him a question. The answer that he gave, blew me away! I had done a little sculpting, myself over the years, the easy way, in clay. All the while I was adding and building up, it was OK. The minute I had to take away that meant I had made a mistake, and a sense of panic overcame me. The equivalent in pencil drawing would be erasing. Thus, the challenge of carving wood seemed utterly impossible to me, because it's all taking away! And if the knife should slip, there would be no putting the wood or your finger, back again. So, I asked Charles how he did it. How did he go about carving an image out of wood? His answer was stunning; and I'll never forget it.

He said, "I see the image in the block of wood, and just remove what doesn't belong there."

This simple statement, uttered so honestly, AMAZED me! Art History has recorded that those very words were spoken centuries ago by none other than Michelangelo, referring to a block of marble. Charles unknowingly was verifying the continuing commonality of genus, as it has been passed down, mysteriously, through the ages.

I've often thought about the wisdom of Charles' words on that occasion, and over time I've come to realize that it applies to more than just his carving. It exemplifies the way he lives his life. He sees the things that really matter, and eliminates what doesn't belong there. His family, his great-grandson Seth, especially, come first and foremost in importance. Even after the accident, he still manages to take Jean out at least one night a week to dance the Polka, which they love. And they attend church religiously every Sunday. But carving remains his greatest pleasure. And when he is not devoting himself to Seth, taking him swimming, reading to him, every night, etc., it occupies most of his time. But all the rest, TV, computers, politics, and the mindless diversions of the day, he simply trims away.

The aftermath of the accident was devastating. The struggle back from weeks in a coma through the long process of rehabilitation has been difficult. There were things he had to learn to do, all over again, and his vision in one eye is permanently impaired. The good news is that Charles, the person, is still there, and so are all his memories. His mind is just as active, and his quick wit and sense of humor is unchanged. We laugh a lot together on the phone. He claims his voice is altered because of scarring from the tracheotomy, but he still sounds the same to me. He does a lot of walking to regain his balance. And much to Jean's dismay, he has also started driving again. Speaking with Charles on the telephone, or hanging out with him, all day, he appears to be exactly the same.

But, there is a battle raging. Charles is fighting to regain his skills at carving. I'm pleased to say that is a battle he is winning! Although, he would still be a long way from agreeing with me. Visualizing objects in 3-D with only one good eye isn't easy. And he claims his manual dexterity isn't what it used to be. In subtle ways, he sees concepts and spatial dynamics differently. But none of these challenges have dissuaded him from carving. He continues with relentless determination.

A few months after Christmas, 2010, eight months after the accident, a belated Christmas present arrived in the mail. It was a smallish shadow box that represents the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman on a sled pulled by the Cowardly Lion of OZ, Charles' first attempts at carving again. The pain and difficulty that he endured to create it is apparent. It is, quite possibly, the most difficult carving he ever did. I am honored that he offered it to me, and I keep it on the wall beside my bed. I see it the first thing, upon awaking in the morning, and I greet it with unpredictable emotions. Sometimes, it is depressing, at other times elating, but, always inspiring. Not everyone will see what I see in this cherished gift, this triumph of Herculean will power over adversity. And Charles, himself, rather dislikes it, so, I will not embarrass him by posting a photo of it, here. If this had turned out to be his final carving, one might be inclined to say the story ended sadly.

But, that, Thank God, is not the case! Charles' story is continuing! Last Christmas, 2011, a large and heavy package arrived here. It contained an unexpected Christmas present. I opened it with trepidation, somewhat fearing what I would see. There was no need to hesitate, for what I beheld was a Miracle! The Biedermann Calendar!

This carving is Amazing, a veritable Explosion of Creativity, a triumph of near death and Transfiguration. One can still detect the painful process that Charles is enduring in articulating some details. His polished prowess as a carver is not quite back completely, but it is on the way. Yet, none of that stuff matters. It takes a back seat to the daring abandon of the piece. It is as if Charles' inner soul and creativity have been set free to burst forth with the visual impact of a Fireworks Display. His Universe has become reorganized in a more dynamic, more exciting, way. My reaction upon seeing it was much as it was when I first beheld the Band Concert, a feeling that Charles has taken a quantum leap onto a higher plain, an altered state, and one, in which I wouldn't change a thing!



A detailed, colorful cake decorated to look like a vintage comic book cover. The cake is shaped like a large, stylized letter 'A' and is covered in various edible decorations, including small figurines of cartoon characters, stars, and text labels. The central text reads "Comic Calendar". Other visible text includes "KRAZY KAT", "Happy Hologon", "Felix the Cat", "The Katzenjammer Kids", "GASOLINE ALLEY", and "FELA CINDERS". The cake is set against a dark background.

It is now the morning of the day after Christmas, 2012. This is a day that's known as "Boxing Day" in England. But it is Shadowboxing Day for me, for my thoughts are deep inside the shadowbox that Charles gave me for Christmas. It depicts a bleak Christmas day in "Junkville". Bo Bug, stands, warming his hands, before the bowl of an old brier pipe that serves him as a makeshift stove. Hot embers glow in its interior, while from the broken pipe stem that has become a chimney, there floats a single wisp of wooden smoke.

We have come full circle, back to those early days, when Charles' favorite Christmas theme was Mickey's Good Deed. In those days, the essence of Christmas, to him, was the joy that radiated from a simple bonfire in the cold. That is the glowing essence of the man as well. I am also thinking, back to a week at Brimfield, 35 years ago, when I first met "CP", through his carvings, reclining beside them in the back of my small station wagon, admiring a shadowbox that, also, depicted Junkville in warmer times, a summer's day. Bucky Bug and June Bug were there as well, along with Bootle Beetle. But in this Christmas carving, Bo is alone.



Charles and I spent several hours on the phone, yesterday, as we have done every Christmas Day, for the past 32 years. It's sort of a tradition. Of course, we discussed everything, from our grandchildren to the state of the World today, which we both agree is a sorry one, not like the Golden Age that we and the Comic Characters grew up in. So here we are, two old timers, powerless to do much about it, sitting on the deck of the Titanic. I have no appetite for rearranging deck chairs, instead, I sit in front of a computer. Charles, on the other hand, is carving

*All of the Art on this site is one of a kind, created by CHARLES PONSTINGL, for the sheer joy of it.
He intended it as loving homage to the Great Comic Artists of former days.
The images are based upon the work of many, including some that were created by, and are
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My gratitude goes out to ERIC MILLEN, who generously encouraged, astounded, and hounded me into making this PDF file happen. It was completely his idea. Eric has convinced me that, through the miracle of PDF, the words and images preserved here have got a chance of outliving both Charles and me. If his prediction turns out to be correct, the proof is here for you to see. Therefore, if you enjoyed seeing this, please thank Eric, once again, for me.

Mel Birnkrant